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Think Outside The Box

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The Benefits of Observation

Have you ever wondered how some people manage to learn without opening a book? You've probably had that one classmate who always managed to do the chemistry experiments without ever reading the manual. Knowledge is not just in books, it's all around us.

Just to be clear, we're not trying to dismiss the importance of reading and studying, we're just emphasizing the benefits of observation in our daily lives. People with social anxiety are poor observers, especially in social contexts. First of all, they're mainly focused on their own behavior because they want to avoid being socially awkward and second, even if they observe other people's behavior, their conclusions are biased by negative thoughts. Not being able to learn by observing others is a huge loss, so let's see how we can turn this simple act into a useful tool.

EXPLORABLE
Quiz Time!

Quiz: Psychology 101 Part 2

Quiz: Psychology 101 Part 2

Quiz: Flags in Europe

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Your Brain Is Wired for Observational Learning

The brain contains a set of neurons that are specifically designed for observational learning. They're called mirror neurons and are responsible for any action that we learn through observation. Here's how it works. When you see someone performing a certain action, the mirror neurons will create a mental image of you performing the same action. But it's not just

about actions, because the mirror neuron system works the same way with gestures, emotions and language. This proves that humans are designed to observe and learn from each other. For people who deal with social anxiety, observation can be a powerful tool because it allows them to learn adaptive behaviors. If you don't know how to behave in certain social contexts, just watch and learn!

Observe to Learn, Not to Pass Judgement

Sometimes, we observe other people's behavior and immediately start criticizing. Instead of learning something useful, we seek to find faults. This is not just something that only people with social anxiety do. Criticism is common for all of us, the only difference is that some use it more than others. If you want to get something good out of your observations, focus on learning. For example, when attending a conference, instead of finding flaws, see how the speaker handles the situation. Maybe, you can learn something useful that you can later apply to your own presentations.

Know What to Observe

If you want to use observation as a useful tool, you must first decide what to observe. Usually, it depends on your own issues. If you're having trouble starting a conversation, just observe others and learn from their behavior. It's important to focus your attention not only on behavior, but also on words, tone of voice, body language and anything else that you could easily imitate. Remember that our brain is already doing this without us being aware of it.

It's all about having a specific goal, because you cannot pay attention to literally everything that happens around you.

Observe How Others React in Similar Situations

This step revolves around the idea of comparison. Suppose you have a problem with acting casual at a party. You see other people that are completely relaxed. You carefully observe their behavior and try to figure out how they do it. In order to fully understand the situation, you need to think about yourself for a moment. How would you react in a similar situation? What are the main differences between your behavior and theirs? The only way to spot a difference is by making comparisons.

Copy Their Behavior

Now that you know how others react in certain situations, you can slowly try to implement some changes in your own behavior. Reflecting a certain behavior is not about mindlessly imitating a person. You're fully aware of the changes and you simply make an effort to reproduce something that worked for others. You don't have to use the same words, dress the same way or drink the same beverage. It's more about adopting the same attitude. Remember, this is not about becoming someone else, but rather about being yourself, with some improvements.